

Competitive Exams: Philosophy: Ethics and Meta-Ethics

Ethics is a normative discipline, not a descriptive discipline. The aim of ethical theory is to give a reasoned account of how we ought to be or act, individually or communally. Ethics is not concerned with describing the sorts of moral views people in fact hold or how they came to hold them. Ethics is concerned with the justification of moral belief.

Meta-ethics is concerned with the nature of morality in general. It is concerned with what justifies moral judgments. Two central meta-ethical issues are whether there are any moral truths and, if so, what makes moral truths true. The view that there are no ethical truths is moral anti-realism or subjectivism. With regard to what grounds ethical truth, if there are such truths, the view that there are ethical truths and their truth is independent of any person or group's power or command is moral realism. The view that ethical truths are grounded in the power or say so of persons is called conventionalism.

If there are moral truths, an account of what makes moral truths true can be given in terms of a theory of value. Another way to put the fundamental meta-ethical issue is asking if there is value to be discovered. The ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle would all say yes. While these ancients differ in their positive views about the good, they would all agree that goodness exists and is independent of the command of men or gods. The modern empiricist Hume argues that there are no moral truths. Hume takes moral expressions to be expressions of sentiment or feeling. While the ancients were value realists and Hume was a value subjectivist, Nietzsche offers a value conventionalist position according to which value is created by willing of great individuals. A society's system of value is created by its great poets, artists, mystics or leaders.

A meta-ethical theory, unlike a normative ethical theory, does not contain any ethical evaluations. The major meta-ethical views are commonly divided into realist and anti-realist views:

Moral realism holds that there are objective values. Realists believe that evaluative statements are factual claims, which are either true or false, and that their truth or falsity does not depend on our beliefs, feelings, or other attitudes towards the things that are evaluated. Moral realism comes in two variants:

Ethical intuitionism or ethical non-naturalism, which holds that there are objective, irreducible moral properties (such as the property of 'goodness'), and that we sometimes have intuitive awareness of moral properties or of moral truths.

Ethical naturalism, which holds that there are objective moral properties but that these properties are reducible to entirely non-ethical properties. Most ethical naturalists hold that we

have empirical knowledge of moral truths. Several have argued that moral knowledge can be gained by the same means as scientific knowledge.

Moral anti-realism holds that there are no objective values. This view comes in three variants:

Ethical Subjectivism, which holds that moral statements are made true or false by the attitudes and/or conventions of observers. There are several different versions of subjectivism, including:

Moral Relativism (sometimes called “cultural relativism”): This is the view that for a thing to be morally right is just for it to be approved of by society; this leads to the conclusion that different things are right for people in different societies. Though long out of favor among academic philosophers, this view has been popular among anthropologists, such as Ruth Benedict.

The Divine Command Theory: Another subjectivist theory holds that for a thing to be right is for a unique being, God, to approve of it, and that what is right for non-God beings is obedience to the divine will. This view was criticized by Plato in the Euthyphro but retains some modern defenders (Robert Adams, Philip Quinn, and others).

Individualist Subjectivism: Another view is that there are as many distinct scales of good and evil as there are subjects in the world. This view was put forward by Protagoras.

The Ideal Observer Theory: Finally, some hold that what is right is determined by the attitudes that a hypothetical ideal observer would have. An ideal observer is usually characterized as a being who is perfectly rational, imaginative, and informed, among other things. Richard Brandt is best-known for his defense of this view.